

Helen Hok-Sze Leung. *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008. 149 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7748-1469-0 (hardcover).

The undercurrents brought to the fore in this book are both a queer account of Hong Kong, and ‘a conscious effort to weave insights from major theoretical works in English seamlessly into Hong Kong’s local Chinese language debates’ (p. 6), including debates in newspapers, non-academic publishing, the internet, and among activists, which may not be recognised as academic, but can nevertheless offer powerful and sophisticated analysis.

Connected with the grounding of this book in these local commentaries, is Leung’s rejection of the ‘belief in the universality and linear progression of gay and lesbian liberation’ assumed to follow a western trajectory (p. 1). She says early on in her study she ‘abandoned “gay and lesbian” as a rubric’ and ‘became fascinated by everything that did not “fit” into the project before: all the representations that seemed too closeted, too ambiguous, or too understated now appeared to me in all their nuance and complexity’ (p. 1). She sees this nuance and complexity as profoundly challenging to sex and gender orders, rather than inadequate or undeveloped.

Leung draws on Peter Jackson’s formulation of ‘pre-gay, post-queer’: ‘By “pre-gay” Jackson means ways of understanding gender and sexual practices in many Asian societies that predate the advent of gay and lesbian politics in the West and that remain irreducible to its terms and trajectories. These notions are also ‘post-queer’ in the sense that they exceed, escape, or at the very least confound Anglo-American understanding of sexual identity, sexual orientation and gender difference’ (p. 66). This formulation disrupts the linear understanding of gay and lesbian liberation which Leung finds so colonialist and constraining, and suggests that the Hong Kong cultures she describes may go even further than queer frameworks in illuminating possibilities for non-conforming sexual practice and meanings.

Several moments are narrated from film, life and activism in Hong Kong illustrating these possibilities. One such moment is film actor and singer Leslie Cheung’s final performance in the ‘Passion’ tour in 2000. He comes on stage, barefoot and dressed

in a white bathrobe, to sing his last encore, 'I am what I am', a well-known gay anthem, but which does not actually say what it is 'I am'. Cheung forbade questions about his personal life in media interviews, and referred to his long time partner only as 'my very good friend'. Yet he played several queer roles, and always expressed respect for **queer** in his public statements. 'While Cheung chose not to answer the underlying question "Are you, or are you not..." he manipulated the site of gossip for an articulation of queer respect' (p. 92). Leung finds his tactics sophisticated and provocative, a 'performance of the closet' (p. 98), flamboyant 'acts of reticence' (p.104). A Foucauldian understanding of power as operating not through repression but through proliferation of certain discourses around sexuality, suggests that keeping people guessing, and denying them knowledge, can be a powerful tool. Leung sees Cheung as 'a queer icon *because* – not in spite – of his ambivalence' (p. 88).

Other subjects analysed are: in Chapter 1, the relationship between post-colonial and queer space, through an examination of six films set in the city; in Chapter 2, the 'erotic culture between girls' in modern Chinese literature and recent Hong Kong cinema; in Chapter 3, transgender and identities which defy gender normative categorisation, in cinema and society; in Chapter 4, the life of Leslie Cheung as above, and in the final chapter, writing by Hong Kong activists.

In narrating the queer undercurrents, Leung is also telling a story of Hong Kong: 'contemporary queer culture in Hong Kong is paradigmatic of the city's postcolonial experience' (p. 5). Both involve ambiguity and denial, a sense of dislocation and a desire for belonging. Leung embraces the ambiguity, and seeks in it both a Hong Kong way to love (people of the same sex) and a way to love Hong Kong, other than the official patriotism of *aiguo aigang* (which means literally 'loving the motherland [China] loving Hong Kong'). Implicit in the book is that the exploration of queer can bring to light another way to see things, and another way to love Hong Kong. This different way is uncovering and seeing the undercurrents, and loving these rather than the official version – whether of gender, sexuality or political orthodoxy.

Leung recognises that her position living in Canada influences her perspective. She cites Yau Ching, Hong Kong film maker and critic, who 'notes that while overseas scholars read against the grain of ambivalent representations to mine their radical

potential, Hong Kong-based scholars seem more invested in exposing their ideological limits and veiled homophobia' (p. 3). Leung does not see Yau's insight as undermining her credibility, but rather as describing a reasonable division of labour. Diasporic critics react against the colonialist 'pressure of the "global gay" narrative' (p. 4) while those in Hong Kong are more invested in challenging the heteronormativity of local power structures. She also finds the different focus to be appropriate in different realms, given that in Hong Kong political hostility to queer activism coexists with a cultural tradition which opens significant space for gender and sexual variance.

This articulate account is a pleasure to read, and is of clear interest to readers interested in queer cultures in Asia. But its appeal is much wider than that. It challenges global narratives, and at the same time explores questions of international relevance: if Western trajectories of lesbian and gay liberation are not universal, what do other challenges to sex and gender orders look like? And how can Western and non-Western knowledge and analysis be brought together to yield new insights?

(Susie Jolly, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton)